

Keep yourself trim during the holiday season

by Christy Wilson, R.D.

The holidays will soon be upon us. The whirlwind will touch down, turn our world upside down and blow away, leaving a mess to clean up—not to mention enough leftovers to feed an army and some extra pounds around the waist. If you want this year to be different, plan now to make the holiday season a trim one.

Weigh yourself now (don't wait until January 2 when you've already indulged in the holiday feeding frenzy). Weighing yourself now will give you a starting point to reference after the new year. All scales are different, so use the same scale each time, wear the same clothes and weigh yourself at about the same time of day. You want to look for trends in your weight so step on the scale no more than twice a week. Keeping track of your weight from now through the holidays will help you avoid the extra weight gain.

Potluck dinners with family, friends and co-workers can derail even the healthiest of lifestyles. Try the "divide and conquer" approach: Think of a picnic plate that lets you sample items without going overboard. At a buffet, fill half your plate with vegetables,



a quarter with meat (opt for low-fat options like fish or chicken) and the other quarter of your plate with starch (rice, bread or pasta). Limit portions of high-calorie dressings, gravies or heavy sauces—they add too many extra calories. For dessert, choose fresh fruit or sugar-free pies or cookies. Want the real thing? You can have it, but keep your portions small.

If you've started an exercise routine, stick with it. Eating more at this time of year (which most of us do) will lead to weight gain if you're not burning off calories by exercising.

Incorporating these suggestions into your lifestyle now can reduce your risk of weight gain and other potential health problems before the New Year arrives.

SAVAHCS Patient Education Group Classes

Heart Failure

1. What is Heart Failure?
 2. Diagnosis and Tests
 3. Nutrition
 4. Medications
 5. Physical Activity
 6. Daily Self-management
- 1st and 2nd Wednesday of every month

Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD)

1. What is COPD?
2. Diagnosis and Tests
3. Medications

4. Breathing Techniques
 5. Nutrition
 6. Safe Use of Oxygen
 7. Keeping Active
- 1st and 3rd Friday of every month

Diabetes

- CLASS #1. What is Diabetes?
- CLASS #2. Medical Nutrition—carbohydrates, sugar and fiber
- CLASS #3. Medical Nutrition—fat, salt and weight management
- CLASS #4. Physical Activity and Medications

CLASS #5. Long-term Complications—sick-day management and daily foot care

Series of five classes—every Thursday from 1 p.m.–3 p.m.

If you are interested in learning more about any of these diseases and want to attend our classes, let your Primary Care Provider know or contact Janet Sommers, R.N., C.D.E., Patient Educator, at **792-1450, ext. 5036**. Visit our Patient Education Resource Center (PERC)—room N281, second floor of Building 2. Open Monday–Friday, from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.



Get active to ease osteoarthritis

If you have osteoarthritis, take a walk—or a swim or a bike ride. In fact, a variety of aerobic exercises will help to relieve pain, improve flexibility and maybe even decrease the need for painkillers.

That's good news for more than 21 million Americans who suffer from osteoarthritis, or degenerative joint disease that affects the hands, feet, knees and hips.

Osteoarthritis occurs when cartilage (tissue that connects bones at joints) wears, frays, ulcerates and, in some cases, disappears completely, leaving bare joints. Symptoms include morning stiffness, tenderness, loss of mobility and function, and creaking and cracking of joints—a term referred to as crepitus.

Although the causes of osteoarthritis are unknown, age, genetics and a lifetime of wear and

tear are thought to be culprits. Although no cure exists, much can be done to ease aches and improve movement.

If you have osteoarthritis, you already know how painful it can be just to tie a shoelace or bend down. It is possible to feel better by improving your diet, adding the right medications and supplements and starting an exercise program.

Begin by walking

You don't have to be a world-class athlete to benefit from exercise. Most people begin by putting on a good pair of sneakers and heading outdoors. Walking is one of the simplest, safest and cheapest ways to alleviate the symptoms of osteoarthritis. Take your time. Start slowly and increase your speed and distance to keep the exercise challenging, without being grueling. Try to make a schedule and stick to it.

If walking becomes boring, try swimming. This is another excellent choice, whether you do pool laps or take up aquatic exercise—stretching, walking and other workouts done in water.

Thanks to the buoyancy of water, it's much easier to move around. Hydrotherapy is also wonderfully soothing to sore and tired joints.

Ride your pain away

Another form of exercise to consider is bike riding, which will help to strengthen thighs and reduce the risk of knee injuries. If you're not up to riding on busy city streets, consider buying a stationary bike for your home or joining a health club. Spinning® classes have become the latest fitness craze and may just be the answer to pedal away your chronic pain.

Of course, it's always important to check with your doctor before you start exercising and to keep your physician informed of your progress.

If you have advanced osteoarthritis, consider working with a physical therapist. That person can show you proper exercise techniques to avoid further injury. Occupational therapists can also help you remain as mobile and independent as possible.

Walking is a step toward better health

Walking is the ultimate exercise. It's something you already know how to do. It's not overly demanding physically. It requires very little equipment. It can be done almost anywhere, anytime. And it can help prevent or reduce the risk of various health problems, including high blood pressure, coronary heart disease and osteoporosis.

To reap the health rewards of walking, you don't even have to walk at top speed. In fact, regular strolls at a pace of three miles per hour can reduce the risk of heart disease by raising levels of HDL (good) cholesterol, according to the Cooper Institute for Aerobics Research.

The problem with most exercise programs is the high drop-out rate. Following are tips for fitting walking into your everyday schedule and keeping your motivation level high.

- Recruit a friend to walk with you.

Companionship will make your walks more



enjoyable and help both of you stick to your program.

- When taking a bus, get off a few blocks before your stop.

- Listen to music or audio books to help pass the time.

- Start a lunchtime walking program at work.

- Pick a time of day and stick to it.

- When driving, park some blocks from your destination.

- For a change of pace or when the weather isn't ideal, head to a nearby mall.

- Walk in a scenic place, such as a park or other area that's pleasing to the eye and the spirit.

- Ask members of your women's group, bridge club or other social organization to join you on a walk before or after meetings.

- Challenge yourself to come up with new ways to make walking a part of your daily life.

Walking 101

Even though you've been walking almost all your life, you may benefit from a brushup on technique and shoe-buying. Walking the wrong way or in the wrong shoes can cause fatigue, muscle strain or injury.

- Keep your head straight (not tilted to either side) and chin parallel to the ground, shoulders level and loose, upper back erect, stomach in, and hips level and directly under your shoulders.
- Don't overstride; take natural steps.
- Swing your arms freely from the shoulders and slightly across your body.
- Buy your walking shoes in the afternoon. Why? Your feet can swell by half a size over the course of a day.
- Look for a shoe with moderate cushioning.
- Make sure the sole of the shoe bends easily at the ball of the foot.
- Look for a shoe with a rigid heel that doesn't bend when you press on it.

When you have to leave home

Admissions and appointments at other VA medical centers

If you are admitted to a VA medical center and require special treatment not available at your local hospital, you may be transferred to another VA. If you have private insurance, let staff know; it might be possible to get care locally. This is especially important if you are getting a long course of treatment like radiation or chemotherapy and will be away from your family.

If you are transferred to another VA hospital, a Patient Transfer Coordinator will make arrangements as soon as a bed is available. The Transfer Coordinator will make sure your medical records are available, get transportation and communicate your medical condition to the receiving team. You will be asked to sign a consent for the transfer. If possible, ask family or friends to bring these things before you are transferred:

- personal hygiene items
- slippers or shoes and socks
- clothing for when you are discharged
- a small amount of money

Important documents to bring with you:

- advance directives (living will or durable power of attorney for healthcare)

■ a list of family or friends who can be reached if you need assistance

■ your insurance cards, Medicare, Medicaid, VA

When your specialized treatment is complete, you will be transferred back to your local VA if you still need hospitalization. If you are well enough to be discharged and you cannot arrange transportation, the VA will help transport you back to the city where you started. Before you are discharged, make sure you understand your discharge instructions, how to take any new medication and where your next appointment will be.

The VA Southwest Health Care Network is working hard to provide outstanding care to our veterans. If you have a problem or concern, don't hesitate to ask for help or contact the patient representative to assist you.

We value your input. During the month of September, our Network will be participating in a nationwide survey of enrollees. This survey, being conducted by VA, will help us garner information about the veterans enrolled in our Network. This data will help us with our future planning efforts to best meet your healthcare needs. So, during the month of September, if you receive a phone call from VA asking you to participate in a survey about VA enrollees, we hope you will take a few minutes to answer the survey. We thank you for your support of this effort!

Visit our Web site to get information on health and medication questions at
http://www.va.gov/visn18/HI/Health_Informatics.htm

For newsletter information contact:
J. L. Pepe Mendoza, Public Affairs Assistant
Southern Arizona VA Health Care System
(520) 629-1819

Trying to quit smoking? Don't know who to call for help? Call the Southern Arizona VA Health Care System "Smoking Cessation Representatives" at (520) 792-1450. You can refer yourself or ask your provider for a referral.

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